

EXCERPT - BABY SHARK'S HIGH PLAINS REDEMPTION

I was sitting on a stool at the short end of the L-shaped lunch counter so I could see the room. There was the kid who was always there reading magazines he couldn't afford to buy. Wally didn't care. "Better he's in here reading than out there getting in trouble."

There were the regulars and a good-sized group of others at the tables. I saw one guy who looked like he wanted to play. I watched his game for a while.

Wally came back with my burger. "Burnt the bun a little. I scraped it."

"It's okay."

"I'll make another if you want."

"It's fine, Wally. And a Dr Pepper."

He went to the ice chest. "While you was gone I saw lights on upstairs. Saw Lee's car, so I knew it was okay."

"Not a problem," I said.

He put my pop on the counter. "You and Lee ever gonna make up?"

Jesus.

"We're talking."

"It's been a month or longer."

"I know. Let's see how it goes."

"We like Lee."

"Me, too. Say, do you know that fella in the green shirt?"

He looked. "Table three?"

"Uh huh."

"Not really."

"You think he has any money?"

Wally chuckled. "You remind me of your daddy sometimes, except he never had a steady job like you. I'm closing in an hour and a half."

As I ate my dinner, I watched the guy some more, and had a look at his cue. He'd brought it with him. I glanced around for his case and spied the beat up leather thing across the room leaning against the wall behind a chair, almost hidden by his jacket that was thrown over the arm of the chair. I had a look at his khaki pants and worn-in, high-top work shoes. He was a traveling man.

My grifter friend, Harlan, told me that gamblers will ignore any sign that stands in the way of them losing their money.

It sure was true of Warren, the guy I'd been watching at table three. When I approached him to shoot some nine ball for cash, guys in the place began drifting over. After we got past me being female and he agreed to play, the crowd left us room, but made a kind of wall around our table. Wouldn't a sane guy have changed his mind at that point?

Unless he was confident he wouldn't lose.

Or didn't care. Harlan again.

We established the bet and agreed to alternate breaks.

"Loser racks," he said.

I shrugged. "Where're you from, Warren?"

He had an accent I couldn't place.

"Around," he said.

"Haven't seen you before."

He didn't say anything.

"I know most of the players in town," I said.

"A town this size. I doubt it."

"I should have said *good* players. Are you a good player, Warren?"

"Why don't you stop your yakkin' and find out?" he said.

That made the crowd hoot. "Grudge match," someone said. But that mob knew me and as soon as we started playing, they grew silent.

We lagged for first break. I won, sank three on the break, and ran the table. He tossed his money in a corner pocket. He broke next and ran the table. I put my money in a side pocket. The winner of the game we were going to play in just over an hour would win it all.

Warren was a sourpuss and self-assured and could shoot nine ball. He had a steady stroke and could leave the cue ball where he wanted it. We played several quick games, trading wins, mostly sinking on the breaks, and running the table. The crowd was being entertained by some clean pool shooting.

He was a slim guy in his twenties, five-eight or -nine, with a light brown, very short crew cut that started way up his skull. He had a narrow head and dark, quick eyes and eyebrows too thick for his face. Come to think of it, his nose didn't work for his face either; the bridge was too flat, too wide. He was like a mongrel, with thin lips that never smiled. And he had a scar on his jaw that seemed too red to me. I considered myself knowledgeable when it came to facial scars.

I became less interested in his game than his looks. The more I studied him, the more convinced I became that Warren was wearing a disguise; a damned good one, but he wasn't who he wanted us to see. He was like me when I was in my horn-rimmed clear eyeglasses and wig.

Warren wanted to be remembered with receding short hair and heavy eyebrows and a fresh scar on his jaw, because later he would have a full head of hair, normal eyebrows, no scar, and maybe he would be wearing glasses.

The skin crawled at the back of my neck.

Armed robbers had Warren's kind of don't-give-a-damn confidence.

At the end of the next game I won, I said, "I'm thirsty. Buy you a beer or a coke or something?"

Mister Confidence shook his head, put his money in the corner pocket, and began racking the balls.

Several guys wandered over with me.

Wally was cleaning his kitchen area. He stopped to serve them beers and got me a Dr Pepper. After the others had paid and walked away, I whispered, "Wally, this guy's cue case is against the far wall behind the chairs there. You see it?"

Wally looked and nodded yes.

"It's standing up a little too straight for an old leather case, don't you think?"

"Now that you mention it," Wally said.

"I think there's a shotgun in there. Can you make your way over with a broom or something, without anyone noticing, and check that out?"

Wally glanced at Warren, brought his eyes back to me, and nodded yes. "What if you're right?"

"Unload it and put it back the way you find it. Can you do that?"

"If you keep the crowd staring at the table, I can."

"Good," I said, and walked away carrying my Dr Pepper.

Wally had been in business and had dealt with the public for a long time. He'd seen armed

robbers before, so I felt certain he knew what was going on. There's no law against carrying a shotgun in a cue case. That gun has to come out of there and be used as a threat before the law can step in.

I hadn't finished my soda pop before Wally was moving around turning out the lights above the tables that weren't being used. Where we were playing, in the center of the darkening room, became an oasis of light as he performed a normal part of his closing-time ritual.

When it was 9:40, I had just won a game and Warren was racking the balls for our final game. I was armed and felt I could take care of things if it got violent, as I suspected it might. My suspicions were based on premonition, but I would rather apologize for flawed intuition than take a chance with the lives of my pool hall friends and the kid still reading magazines.

We lagged for the final game; I won, and ran the table. Anything could have gone wrong, but it didn't, and the place went nuts when I dropped the last ball. One of the regulars dug the money out of the corner pocket and began counting it aloud. Somebody else dragged my money from the side pocket and tidied it up to give back to me.

I called out, "Hey, everyone. It's closing time now, but come back tomorrow night and the beers are on me until we've spent all of Warren's money."

That made everyone happy. They jeered and laughed as they gathered their belongings and headed for the door where Wally stood, ready to lock up after the last customer left.

I stepped out of the light, pulled my .38, and jacked in a round with my back to where I knew Warren was returning from getting his jacket and cue case.

I turned back to face the lighted area without moving into it, keeping my pistol behind my leg. In my other hand, I pinched in plain view the two stacks of money I had been given; a little something for misdirection in case I needed it.

"Who do we have left, Kristin?" Wally called out from the door.

"Just Warren," I said. "Lock up. I think he wants to talk."

I heard the double dead bolts on the front door thud into place as Warren came toward me around the edge of the circle of light. By his side, in a relaxed hand, he held a sawed-off shotgun. A lanyard dangled from an eyebolt screwed into the chopped-off stock so the stubby weapon could be hung from his shoulder under a coat.

Our boy was all business.

My heartbeat cranked up a notch. "You a sore loser, Warren?"

"Tell him to unlock the front door."

I didn't say or do anything. He leveled his shotgun at me.

"Tell him or it's gonna get nasty."

"You'll break your wrist if you fire that with one hand."

"What's going on?" Wally asked as he walked up to us.

"Crybaby wants his money back."

Wally reached over, snatched the money from me, and started for his office. "I'll just put that in the safe."

Warren raised his voice. "Stop right there, Old Man."

Wally ignored him and walked on.

Warren pumped his gun to chamber a shell and brought it down on the pool hall owner. "I said stop."

Wally kept walking and Warren squeezed the trigger. Click.

He looked stunned.

He glanced at me, pumped the gun, and tried again. Click.

He'd made his point.

I shot him in the knee.

He cried out and fell back, his arms flailing. His elbow hit hard against a table edge and sent his shotgun clattering across the floor. As he collapsed, I stepped forward and drop kicked him in the face.

"Sorry to muss your makeup," I said.

Wally came back over, the money still in his fist. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Stay out of the light. There's somebody outside. That's why he wanted the door unlocked."

"Uh huh," Wally said, and looked toward the front.

"It's time to call the police," I said.

"Did that already," Wally allowed.

A few moments later there was pounding at the front door, and we saw brightly colored patrol car lights.

"Better let 'em in before they break my glass."

As he walked away, I said, "Stick that money in your pocket, Wally, or the cops'll take it as evidence."

I looked down at Warren, the would-be killer of my friend.

He was in pain, seated awkwardly, supporting himself with a stiff arm, the knee of his khaki pants dark with blood. His nose was bleeding, too. He was staring at me with his good eye, the one that wasn't swelling shut.

"You cunt," he said.

What would Otis do?

What the hell. I kicked him again, that time in his injured knee.

Dialing the police wasn't Wally's only independent action. The busybody's other phoning efforts included ringing up Detective Lee Pierson.

It rubbed me the wrong way at first, but I have to admit it was nice to see the handsome guy crossing the poolroom looking worried about me. Like Wally and Otis had pointed out, it had been a few weeks.

And because I was the reason a respected Dallas detective made an appearance at a Fort Worth crime scene, I was shown professional courtesy and didn't have to go downtown until the next day to reclaim my weapon and provide a formal statement.

When things were all wrapped up at his place of business, Wally turned out the lights, locked the front door from the outside, and left us there in the dark.

Lee and I talked for a while and, of course, ended up stretched out on a table, kissing. That caused him to decide, given that I'd suffered the trauma of an armed robbery attempt, that it might be wise if he kept an eye on me.

"Psychological reactions are the rage these days," he said, holding me in his arms.

"I read that article," I said, snuggling closer.

"Uh huh, well, I wouldn't want you to be alone if you should..."

"Suddenly find myself suffering from a psychological reaction?"

"Exactly."

"Mmmm. We should probably go upstairs, then."

"The better to keep an eye on you?"

“You just never know,” I said.

“That’s the thing, isn’t it? We should play it safe.”

“If you think so,” I said.